

**LACDMH CLERGY ACADEMY & ST JOSEPH CHURCH
CELEBRATE GRADUATION**
By Karen Zarsadiaz-Ige, LACDMH Public Information Officer



On Saturday, July 18, 2015, the Clergy Academy celebrated the graduation of 43 participants who belong to the parish community of St. Joseph Church in Hawthorne. With the help of Fr. Greg King, the graduates dedicated a year to completing the program, attending weekend classes that were taught in English and Spanish.

“A community acting together has a great impact on its wellbeing and that of its individual members,” said Marvin Southard, DSW, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH). He saw the potential for collaboration between LACDMH and St. Joseph Church to help the communities of Hawthorne and Lennox. “In fact, this impact is greater than what our services alone can achieve. We jumped at the opportunity offered by the vision Fr. King had for bringing wellness to his parish.”

Considered first responders, faith leaders find themselves to be a resource when congregants seek help, especially when it is very personal and emotional. Because of this, many faith leaders are eager to learn how they can attend to their congregants’ need for mental health services and remain supportive of their members’ wellness and recovery.

LACDMH created the Clergy Academy to provide faith-based and community leaders with information about various mental health-related topics and social issues. The goal of the Academy is to build healthier communities by promoting mental health awareness, reducing stigma associated with mental illness and increasing access to quality mental health services. Academy participants can attend free presentations by mental health clinicians on a variety of topics, such as bullying/harassment, crisis management, domestic violence, gangs, substance use, etc.

According to Dr. Southard, faith-based organizations and its leaders can play a powerful role in rallying a community to come together and act on its collective interest. “We wanted to collaborate with Fr. King and the lay leaders at St. Joseph on developing the community’s capacity for mental wellness,” continued Dr. Southard. “We felt that any upfront investment we made in enhancing the mental health literacy of the community through the Clergy Academy Program would return great dividends down the road by improving the community’s mental wellness.”

In addition to the classes offered by the Academy, LACDMH has helped develop tools that can be used and maintained by the community, such as a local resource guide and support groups.

“We have just completed the first phase of this partnership and are encouraged by the community’s participation,” noted Dr. Southard. “The graduation is a culmination of the first phase. We look forward to continuing this partnership and applying what we learn in other communities around Los Angeles County.”

“The Clergy Academy presentations have equipped its participants with the confidence to recognize the symptoms of sickness and the means of finding resources for authentic healing,” explained Fr. King. “Graduates have learned the importance of confronting one’s fear as the first step in the healing process. As people of faith, we believe that all healing comes from God, and that He has blessed us with advances in science that allows us to better understand how to collaborate with Him in a true healing ministry.”